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Civil Registration: Maintaining International Standards in Emergencies

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Civil Registration: Maintaining International Standards in Emergencies

by Srdjan Mrkić

INTRODUCTION

Civil registration is defined as the continuous, permanent, compulsory, and universal recording of the occurrence and characteristics of vital events pertaining to the whole population. The international set of standards and recommendations on establishing, maintaining, and operating national civil registration systems has been developed by the United Nations since the early 1950s and was regularly updated, with the most recent version issued in 2015. It places civil registration front and centre of the holistic approach to civil registration, vital statistics, and identity management as elaborated in the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda.

The term "civil registration method" refers to the procedure employed in gathering the basic information on the incidence and characteristics of vital events that occur in the population of a country (or area) within a specified time period, upon which the preparation of vital records with legal value and the production of vital statistics are based. This method should be distinguished from other methods of gathering data about the population because it is mandated by law to be continuous and permanent. Information

collected within the framework of this system has legal authority.¹

Registration as a continuous process implies also that the process is a permanent one. Registration maintained for short periods and then allowed to lapse will not yield data and measures that are useful, either as current incidence statistics or as indicators of changes over time.

Enactment of legislation that makes registration compulsory is the best means of ensuring continuous, permanent recording of vital events. Such legislation should provide sanctions to ensure fulfilment of the requirements of the registration system. Thus, the registration method is characterized not only by the continuous nature of its observations, but also by its compulsoriness. Both features are fundamental to the successful operation and maintenance of the system.

A system of civil registration includes all institutional, legal, and technical settings needed for the performance of civil registration functions in a technical, sound, coordinated, and standardized manner throughout the country, taking into account the cultural and social circumstances particular to that country.

1 United Nations. 2014. unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/Standards-and-Methods/files/Principles_and_Recommendations/CRVS/M19Rev3-E.pdf

The registration functions include:

- Recording vital events;
- Storage, safekeeping, and retrieval of vital records;
- Protection of confidentiality;
- Certificate issuing and other customer services;
- Recording and reporting information on vital events for statistical purposes; and
- Providing reliable and timely information and data to other government agencies, such as the ministry of health, population registers, pension fund systems, electoral services, personal identification services, and research institutions.²

Therefore, the essential purpose of civil registration is to furnish legal instruments of direct interest to individuals. All societies today exhibit considerable complexity in interpersonal relations and increasing bureaucratization in dealings between individuals and the state. Hence it is important, in order to ensure certainty in legal matters, that individuals be provided with probatory instruments that allow them to prove, with ironclad certainty, the facts relating to their existence, identity, and personal and family situation. The principal reason for civil registration — its basic purpose and one that must be facilitated by the state — is to serve as an institution capable of disclosing facts relating to civil status based on technical legal principles. Through this institution, individuals can be assured of the legitimacy and authenticity of civil status-related facts in order to accredit them to

other individuals or the administration itself, by means of public registration documents known as certifications.

Consequently, in the contemporary paradigm, civil registration provides both the certification of identity for a newborn child and also critical entry into the identity management system, whether through the standalone population register or, in the case where population registers are subsumed by the identity management system, directly into it. At the other end of the life cycle, civil registration also plays a critical role in notifying the occurrence of deaths to the population register and the identity management system, so that the records can be amended accordingly, and those identities are withdrawn or marked as “deceased.”³

The United Nations Legal Identity Agenda, launched in May 2019, builds on these characteristics of civil registration. This agenda takes a holistic approach to civil registration of all vital events, production of vital statistics, and the establishment and maintenance of population registers and identity management apparatus from birth to death (Figure 1). The agenda requires full interoperability⁴ between these functions in a simultaneous manner, according to international standards and recommendations and in compliance with the human rights of all people concerned, including the right to privacy. All United Nations Member States should adopt and implement this agenda as a systematic and perpetual mechanism for ensuring legal identity for all.⁵

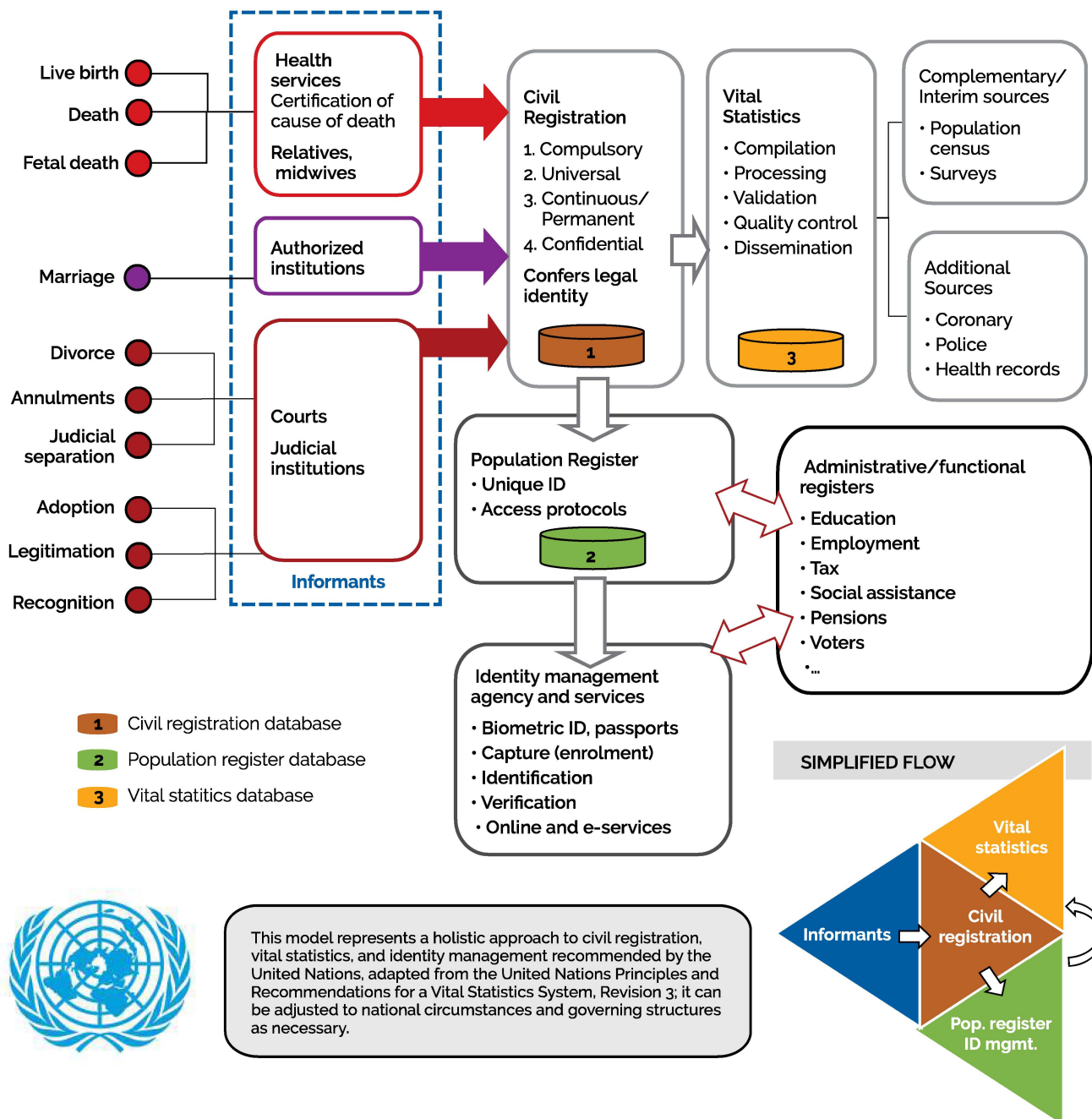
2 United Nations. 2014.

3 United Nations. 2018. Revision 1, paragraphs 83 and 84.

unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/Standards-and-Methods/files/Handbooks/crvs/crvs-mgt-E.pdf

4 Interoperability in this context refers primarily to ensuring that systems are using the same set of definitions, classifications, and methodology, as well as technologically compatible platforms allowing for full harmonization of interfaces and access protocols. Interoperability between functions does not infer allowing full access and manipulating records and content of any single system.

5 United Nations. 2020. Paragraph 83. unstats.un.org/legal-identity-agenda/documents/UNCT-Guidelines.pdf

Figure 1: Civil registration, vital statistics, and identity management system.

In implementing the holistic approach to civil registration, vital statistics, and identity management, Member States need to guarantee the universal recording of all vital events occurring in the country, primarily births and deaths. This requires ensuring that the network of civil registrars covers the entire country and that civil registrars, in their role as civil servants, deliver the registration services in a continuous, mandatory, and confidential manner. The two major components are the updated legal framework for civil registration and the extension of the network of civil registrars to cover all the regions — both clearly identified as government functions and responsibilities.⁶

CIVIL REGISTRATION PRINCIPLES⁷

The purpose of a country's civil registration system is to record and store information on the occurrence of vital events and their characteristics and to permit retrieval of the information when needed for legal, administrative, statistical, and other uses. The work is accomplished through the registration method. Civil registration is carried out primarily because the resulting legal documents, as provided for by law, are valuable; at the same time, the usefulness of these records as a main source of vital statistics is universally recognized.

The civil registration method may be characterized as follows: it is compulsory, universal, continuous, permanent, and confidential. In addition, the records generated through this method should be maintained in such a way as to ensure that they can be retrieved individually, as required.

Compulsory. A country's civil registration system must be compulsory in order to assure its smooth operation and effectiveness. While it is necessary for every country to establish a law on registration, the existence of such a law is not a sufficient

condition for ensuring that the general public reports the occurrence of vital events. Compulsory registration has to be linked to the imposition of some form of penalty on those who fail to comply with registration laws; i.e., failure to register the occurrence of a vital event should be punishable by law. Since penalties for failure to comply with registration laws may not always be invoked and penalties may also be a deterrent to registration, it is imperative that there be a legal basis for prosecution to ensure that general compliance with the registration law is practiced. Thus, a legal framework for civil registration is fundamental to its sound operation as a coherent, coordinated, and technically sound system.

In spite of the existing provisions for penalties in a number of countries in cases of non-compliance, the level of completeness of registration remains low. The most important reason for such non-compliance is the lack of incentives for registration. Incentives must be established not only to stimulate but also to encourage compliance with the compulsory registration law. Besides the privileges and rights that are to be enjoyed upon proof of registration, national registration systems, within their own respective socio-cultural environments, should offer other incentives that are of practical use, especially at the individual level.

Universal. In order to ensure that maximum value is derived from the registration system by both individuals and users of vital records and statistics information, registration requirements must apply to the entire population of the country, independent of geographical location or population subdivision. When there are significant variations in the level of social and economic development in different parts of the country, it may be necessary to establish special procedures for the registration of certain vital events. However, the universality of civil registration

⁶ United Nations. 2020. Paragraph 87.

⁷ United Nations. 2014.

must be maintained. Vital events occurring to residents who are abroad temporarily should also be registered.

Continuous and permanent. The continuity and permanence of the registration method require an agency of sufficient administrative stability whose operation is not limited by time. Permanence of the system is a requirement for the continuity of registration and vital statistics data, which is necessary for a meaningful understanding of both current figures and trends in vital statistics measures.

Confidential. Through the civil registration method, a variety of information is collected about individuals within the population. While all information collected has importance, some data, when identified with a specific individual, may be highly personal and sensitive. In order to promote the provision of full and honest data to the system, the confidentiality of the information must be protected. That is, those who provide information must rest assured that it will be used only for the purposes prescribed by law and/or in aggregated form so that they are not identifiable.

Confidentiality provisions should not be so rigid as to exclude the use of the records for special studies, nor should those provisions weaken the value of those records as legal documents. Considering the wide administrative, public health, and social uses made of accurate civil registration records, it is impossible to guarantee absolute confidentiality in connection with purely statistical inquiries. However, confidentiality provisions can be spelled out in such a way as to ensure that the records are used for research purposes without publicly disclosing the identity and characteristics of the parties involved. Similarly, copies of the records to be used for the establishment of legal facts (e.g., proof of occurrence, proof of age) need not include some or all of the statistical items.

Because of the importance of confidentiality to data quality as well as data usefulness, a provision for confidentiality of information and protection of the privacy of individuals should be part of civil registration law.

CIVIL REGISTRATION IN EMERGENCIES

The civil registration system, as described above, needs to be capable of universal registration of all vital events in a country. However, as documented by the United Nations,⁸ in approximately one half of the world's countries or areas, civil registration is not complete and universal, thus depriving a significant population of accessing the basic legal documents that establish (birth certificate) and retire (death certificate) the legal identity of individuals. Thus, in the best and normal circumstances, the functioning of civil registration is not complete; consequently, one can expect that civil registration services would deteriorate in the case of emergencies.

In an effort to illustrate the enormous challenges civil registration faces in times of emergency, the UN Statistics Division, as a co-chair of the UN Legal Identity Agenda Task Force, initiated a survey in April and May 2020. The survey assessed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the functioning of civil registration worldwide and was used to develop a set of guidance and recommendations to countries. The survey included the following four questions:

1. Is civil registration considered an essential service in your country? Namely, in a number of countries affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, only the employees of essential services are required to report for duty, while non-essential services' employees are requested to stay at home in order to minimize the spreading of the virus.

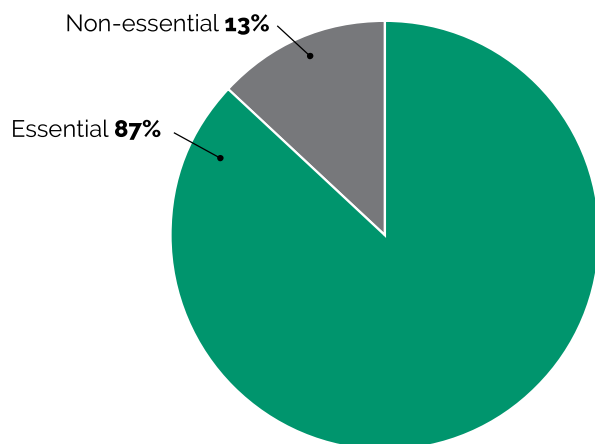
8 United Nations Statistics Division. unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/crvs/

2. What are the impacts of COVID-19 on the registration of vital events and the functionality of the civil registration authority, in general?
3. What are the working arrangements being implemented or planned to be implemented during the current or possible upcoming COVID-19 containment period to ensure continuity?
4. How is your office addressing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the registration of vital events? What are the recommendations to the civil registration offices to ensure that all births, deaths, marriages, and other vital events are registered during this time?

The source of national practices and examples of responses in this chapter is the Survey on Maintaining Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in COVID-19 pandemic⁹ (further referenced as the COVID-19 Survey). The survey collected replies from 67 countries/areas from all over the world.

In replying to the question on whether civil registration was identified as an essential service in times of pandemic, a majority of countries/areas replied positively (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Percentage of countries/areas whose civil registration is considered an essential or non-essential service.



Yet, 13 percent of the respondents indicated that their respective governments, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, refrained from placing the civil registration function on the list of essential services that have to be provided even during a pandemic. The rationale behind these decisions was primarily the understandable concern to minimize the risks of exposure to the virus. The following are some examples of responses (and the dates they were submitted).




Malawi, 22 April 2020: Civil registration is not considered as an essential service in the country. At this stage in Malawi, civil servants are not being asked to stay at home but rather work in shifts to minimize congestion and the National Registration Bureau (NRB) is also doing the same.

NRB staff are working in shifts, meaning records are not being processed as normal. This will eventually create backlog in the system. Again, staff working in health facilities are afraid to perform their duties as usual since they are afraid of contracting the virus. The chances are high that if proper measures are not put in place, they may start absconding from work. The same applies to staff at the District Registration Office who are afraid to interact with clients. Another impact is that other stakeholders that we work with have also slowed down, therefore affecting our performance. These include IT service providers and technical experts and donor partners who have either travelled back to their countries or are working from home. We will have a clear picture as time goes. There is a need to come up with a proper plan including provision of protective gear and sanitizers in order to keep the registration functionality going.

⁹ See the UN Legal Identity Agenda at unstats.un.org/legal-identity-agenda/COVID-19/

Right now, what is being implemented is working in shifts in all offices. This will ensure that there is a staff to continue with the registration. Working from home is also being considered, especially for those that do not have to meet clients. This means providing good Internet service to officers working from home. Government guidelines will also play a big role on these decisions. Ideas from different stakeholders are welcome. And the aim is to make sure that registration is not suspended.

So far, the office is putting in strict preventive measures as guided by experts. These include washing hands regularly in and around the office, use of hand sanitizers, wearing of masks, especially those in the frontline like hospitals, and working in shifts of small numbers of staff. All suspicious clients are also being referred to health authorities.¹⁰

 **Uganda, 22 April 2020:** Following the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic to Uganda, the Government imposed a 14-day lockdown period effective 31 March 2020. Essential services and employees of these essential services were permitted to continue with their work. The Civil Registration Authority was not among the providers of essential services advised to continue. However, among these essential services are the health facilities where approximately 73 percent of births occur and about 300,000 deaths occur annually. The health facilities play an important role in notifying the Civil Registration Authority of these events. Key IT staff have been maintained to ensure the systems are up and running to ensure that all births and deaths are notified electronically during this time.

All Civil Registration offices countrywide were closed. Uganda currently operates an online tool known as Mobile Vital Records System (MVRS) accessed by a significant number of



Photo: Arne Hoel / World Bank

health facilities where these events of birth and death continue to be notified online in real time. For those facilities without the necessary infrastructure, manual notification tools were provided. Due to the lockdown, these cannot be retrieved, and the registration process cannot be completed. The Registration Officers have been encouraged to access the notified records online using the MVRS tool and register the events. Due to the closure of offices countrywide, no certificates of birth and death can be issued at the moment. Scheduled activities such as outreach to hard-to-reach areas and underserved communities were in addition halted. The halting of CRVS functions will have an impact on national planning and therefore service delivery as a number of births and deaths during this period may be unregistered.

Duty bearers, such as the Ministry of Health and Local Government and staff of the civil registry office, have been encouraged to continue online notification and registration of the events of births and deaths. The Civil Registry Office

10 COVID-19 Survey.

has adopted the use of online meeting tools to continue the coordination of CRVS activities especially between the civil registry office and the Ministry of Health aimed at strengthening civil registration.

Uganda has only started dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic and is only beginning to deal with effects of the pandemic on civil registration. The Civil Registration office is focusing on strengthening online notification and registration of these civil registration events to ensure continuity. Minimum IT staff have been maintained to ensure the systems are up and running to ensure that all births and deaths are notified during this time. In addition, harnessing the use of all communication channels such as emails, social media, and online meeting avenues to coordinate and monitor performance of CRVS online activities.

Recommendations: 1) Enable and expand the use of online tools to notify and register civil registration events to allow for continuity in case of a pandemic like COVID-19.

2) A strengthened collaboration with key stakeholders like the Ministry of Health ensures that the events that occur in health facilities are notified even in the midst of a pandemic.

3) Ensure the integration of systems with the Ministry of Health for a smooth uninterrupted process of notification.¹¹



Samoa, 9 April 2020: 1) To date, Samoa's public service is still opening including the civil registration, but the hours of work have been reduced from 9 am–5 pm to 9 am–3 pm during the partial lockdown. But the civil registration will not be considered as an essential service in a full lockdown.

2) It is the business community that is mostly affected with closure of public leisure places like parks, restaurants, bars, buses (only taxis

and private cars are allowed now), and also the closure of schools and church services and the supermarkets only open from 6 am–6 pm. Given the strict measures on social distancing in the public and also the closure of bus transportation which is the main and the cheapest form of transportation in Samoa, and the closure of schools and church services, the registration of vital events has been really cut down by about 70 percent.

3) As mentioned before, Samoa's public service is still opening, including the civil registration but the hours of work have been reduced from 9 am–5 pm to 9 am–3 pm. Our employees have been put on rotational shift during the week to keep the distance of 2 metres apart in the working place. Given the slow registration at this time, we have also reduced the registration hours from 10 am–2 pm. We have also used office vehicles to pick up and drop off staff affected by the bus closure. We have also used the media to inform the public about opening hours and contact numbers for any registration matters. The notices are also on our website.

4) Honestly, before COVID-19, our registration system has been very low at about 70 percent for births and 30 percent for deaths. Before COVID-19, we already started working with the Office of the Attorney General to look into our existing legislation and identify areas to improve the public's compliance to the registration of births, deaths, and also marriages. The temporary lockdown of about 6 weeks has given us more time to assess our internal registration systems and processes further and then note areas to prioritize for improvement once we come back to normality. We have just appointed a new Registrar last month and there is a lot of work that needs to be done to improve our registration processes.

11 COVID-19 Survey.

5) Samoa has already embarked on the implementation of its National ID project which will also include the technical assessment of the existing civil registration system as it will be used as the foundational data for the digital National ID. Our office is leading this project. This is the opportunity that we have been waiting for some time to go in conjunction with our internal assessments and we are really excited about this big project which is funded by the World Bank. To date, the Legal Team contracted to draft the National ID legislation has just started last week and now working from a distance due to COVID-19. Secondly, our Technical ID team will also be on board in another two weeks. So we are expecting a lot of civil registration related activities in the next several months which we hope will lead to a more efficient identification and registration system for all Samoa residents and citizens in the future.¹²

Therefore, even if the countries did not formally designate civil registration as an essential service, country practices clearly indicate that all efforts were being made to accommodate the needs of the population in terms of registration of vital events. It is also evident that authorities were fully aware of the importance of having mechanisms to fully assess the adverse impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on all aspects of governance and wellbeing of the population. They often acted to introduce immediate measures to access these data, by insisting on implementing a more direct interaction between the health and the civil registration sector and introducing online tools for reporting vital events.

Even if civil registration was designated an essential service, would that ensure its proper functioning? The following examples from responses provide an overview.



Lesotho, 22 April 2020: Lesotho considers civil registration as an essential service, however due to lack of PPE and other consumables to protect staff and enable compliance with WHO requirements on mitigating the spread of the virus, Ministry of Home Affairs adopted a policy to register current deaths.

Registration of vital events has been highly affected. The enforcement of lockdown measures, including the stay-at-home requirement to minimize the spread of the virus, led the Ministry of Home Affairs to conclude and adopt a policy that only deaths that occur during this time should be registered to enable the families to bury their deceased and claim from their respective insurances. This in turn has a major impact on civil registration as other vital events are not registered as and when they occur. This will in turn severely affect the completeness of the vital statistics and therefore render the vital statistics not much useful in the fight against COVID-19.

Death registration has been identified as an event that will be registered during the lockdown and/or containment period. Other events are registered after assessment has been made by the section head or supervisor that indeed are needed urgently. The staff have been reduced to prevent congestion and a shift system has been employed. All the plans made are in line with the State of Emergency Regulations enacted in the Government Gazette.

Only deaths that occur are registered. Robust registration activities will be undertaken after the lockdown to register all events.¹³

¹² COVID-19 Survey.

¹³ Ibid.



Mozambique, 22 April 2020: The civil registry is considered a priority in Mozambique. At the moment, the civil registry services are working on employee rotation every 15 days and the minimum services for the population are in place as we are still in phase 3 of emergency.

Low turnout, some of the civil registry offices have been closed. We have some impacts with COVID-19 on the records of vital events such as most marriages have been cancelled, of which only about 10 people can participate. The 120-day periods for free registration have been suspended, and the civil registry offices in the health units have been suspended for reasons of prevention of the employees there.¹⁴



Sierra Leone, 22 April 2020: Civil registration is considered an essential service in Sierra Leone because it compulsorily records all vital events, particularly births and deaths registration. Although Sierra Leone is yet to strictly implement a policy of non-essential services to stay at home, the Government notice of 9 April 2020 directed the Head of the Civil Service, the Human Resource Management Office (HRMO), and heads of Ministries, Department and Agencies (MDAs) to implement alternate working days for their staff. Registration Offices remain open throughout the country, though, with low turnout for registration as result of the restrictions on public gatherings.

COVID-19 has had a huge impact on the registration of vital events in Sierra Leone. Due to the Government's restrictions on travel and other movements, residents have limited access to Civil Registration Centres.

For example, the mass confirmation of registrants' personal details and new registrations planned for the first quarter of 2020 have been postponed; CRVS Stakeholder/Coordination meetings are affected as most members, especially development partners, are observing alternate working arrangements as well as restrictions on public gatherings. CRVS funding has been affected as donors have re-programmed their resources and support towards COVID 19.¹⁵

Consequently, the fact that civil registration was identified as an essential service, the particular and strong set of measures aimed at mitigating the impact of the pandemic, and the spread of the disease had nevertheless an adverse impact on the functioning of civil registration. Whether it was the lockdown or the limitations in terms of public transport or the reluctance of people to visit government offices such as civil registration offices for fear of contagion, the end result was the much lower registration of vital events even when being designated an essential government service.

The importance of having civil registration designated as an essential service, especially in emergencies, however, cannot be overemphasized. That is the first step in positioning civil registration as a critical service that governments need to establish, operate, and maintain in all circumstances. In that context, the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda issued a set of guidelines at the onset of the pandemic¹⁶ strongly emphasizing that civil registration should be considered an "essential service" mandated to continue operations during a pandemic. Although some physical offices may need to be closed, or opening hours limited or staggered, operations

¹⁴ COVID-19 Survey.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ United Nations Legal Identity Agenda. 2020.

unstats.un.org/legal-identity-agenda/documents/COVID-19-Guidelines.pdf

should be maintained as far as possible, whether in-person, or virtual, during a crisis. Depending on the capacity, certain registration processes (such as legitimations) may be put on hold, but registration of births, deaths, fetal deaths, and recording of causes of death should continue as a priority.

To ensure that the civil registration function continued during the COVID-19 pandemic, countries/areas developed a number of solutions that would still enable population access to the necessary legal documents, such as birth and death certificates. These decisions and mechanisms varied, yet clearly indicate the necessity of analyzing their efficiency in terms of developing contingency planning and measures in the wake of this pandemic.

For example, Panama allowed that medical certificates — which are regularly used to issue a birth certificate, which is in turn a seed document — could be used temporarily as seed documents themselves:



Panama, 22 May 2020: Birth and death notifications are considered valid so that the population can utilize them for further paperwork during the confinement period. For this, medical facilities must issue family members a simple copy with a fresh stamp. Death notifications are being utilized for burials. It is worth indicating that the Civil Registration Authority provides medical notification forms to health institutions and morgues, which are used with a threefold purpose: statistical, birth registration, and medical information. In this vein, delivery of these forms has been maintained on demand; this is done in hard copy and monitored in the computer system.¹⁷



Photo: Gerardo Pesantez / World Bank



Argentina, 21 April 2020: Argentina developed a set of activities to maintain the civil registration function in the pandemic. Working arrangements to ensure service continuity to citizenry include diverse measures, such as planning and establishing scheduled appointments for in-person service, rotational shifts, availability of virtual media for inherent registration services and/or queries, phone communication channels for public service, as well as working remotely or teleworking for staff whose physical presence is not needed. In addition, the Civil Registration Authorities in the provinces and in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, have established, according to their competencies, several in-person service channels for the public (scheduled appointments and shifts) and remote services (through phone, official websites). Also, each authority has activated health protocols for their registrars and the public, observing measures adopted by the national government and the health authority. In particular, the National Register of Persons (RENAPER) has extended the validity of national identity documents; measures were also adopted in terms of

17 COVID-19 Survey.

service to the public, scaling down due to the pandemic, and distributing service in the different offices and service areas by allocating previously scheduled appointments. In addition, RENAPER abolished the administrative periods and deadlines (Disposition 163/2020 of the National Directorate of RENAPER). At the same time, RENAPER released staff who are not in the essential or critical areas from attending physically; these staff are expected to perform their usual or similar duties from home. Also, RENAPER has authorized extraordinary leave, as a manner of prevention, with full pay, to staff who have to comply with social distancing due to a number of reasons, namely having arrived to Argentina from “affected zones,” being classified as “suspicious cases,” being 60 years of age or older, being pregnant, and belonging to risk groups (Disposition 164/2020 of the National Directorate of RENAPER).¹⁸



Armenia, 13 April 2020: In the context of the state of emergency declared on 16 March to 12 April in regard with the prevention of coronavirus diseases in the Republic of Armenia, civil status acts registration territorial bodies shall register only deaths and births. The staff of Civil Status Acts Registration (CSAR) bodies have been placed at the three largest hospitals in Yerevan to ensure the birth registration of children in a safe environment. At the same time, registrations of paternity acknowledgement or marriages of the child's parents are conducted. The registration period for all other vital events has been suspended. Citizens have been forewarned that all registration will take place at the CSAR offices after the official restrictions of free movement are lifted.¹⁹



Philippines, 24 April 2020: Civil registration is an essential service in the Philippines, although due to the current pandemic (COVID-19), delivery of civil registration services in terms of issuance of copies of civil registry documents is affected due to the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) implemented by the government.

COVID-19's impact on registration is the observed delay in the registration of vital events because of the quarantine period. Yet, in many parts of the country, the offices of the City/Municipal Civil Registrars are still functioning, as they are maintaining a skeletal workforce to ensure that civil registration services are still available in their locality.

Establishing a skeletal workforce in civil registry offices, including the Civil Registration Service of the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), caters to the very urgent need for civil registry documents, especially the overseas Filipino workers. PSA established hotlines wherein citizens can inquire about the status of their previously forwarded civil registry documents before the quarantine period.

The PSA issued a memorandum circular to all civil registrars in the country on guidelines to follow regarding the registration of vital events during this COVID-19 period. The circular also highlights the need to ease the requirements regarding the delayed registration of vital events due to the pandemic.²⁰



Iran, 14 April 2020: Civil registration, especially birth and death registration, is one of the basic services in the country, and except for public and national holidays, this service is not closed, especially by the National Organization of Civil Registration.

18 COVID-19 Survey.

19 Ibid..

20 Ibid.

Activating the “Notification Network” for vital events registration. Considering the necessary actions in civil registration offices to ensure social distancing, notifying vital events electronically to registration offices, as possible.

Deadlines for vital events notification, such as birth and death events, are relaxed during COVID-19 and also penalties for delay notification are not considered. However, due to the existence of the Notification Network, the civil registration offices are informed of the occurrence of the event. By the way, registration and issuance of documents may be delayed. Civil registration offices are responsible after COVID-19 containment to register vital events that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic at any time.

Civil Registration Coordination Council in provinces and cities are activated. The Civil Registration Coordination Council in cities includes members of Forensic Medicine, Post, Municipality, Governorate, Justice, Health Network, and Department of Agriculture.²¹

As presented, countries around the world introduced a set of measures intended to enable the functioning of civil registration in the COVID-19 pandemic. Those measures included

- a less rigorous interpretation of rules and procedures for registering the occurrence of a vital event;
- a focus on registering births and deaths as a primary concern and postponing the registration of other events;
- instituting and deploying coordination mechanisms at the local level that bring together different institutions involved in the registration process;
- measures for maintaining physical distancing and other protective protocols; and
- waiving of the fees and simplification of the registration processes.

Yet another set of actions has been introduced in a number of countries in attempting to ensure the registration of vital events continues to function even in times of pandemic, and these relate to online registration. Computerization of civil registration is one of the major international recommendations, as contemporary requirements placed on the civil registration system in providing services to the population and the technological environment call for complete and comprehensive computerization of all registration and production of vital statistics. The computerization of civil registration is even more imperative as other government functions are increasingly relying on computer technology, reflecting the development of e-government. With the introduction and the massive use of the Internet, populations expect similar functionality in the delivery of services by the government as well.²²

Data collected indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic certainly acted as a catalyst in this respect. A number of countries either introduced or strengthened online applications for registration of vital events.



Rwanda, 22 April 2020: In Rwanda, civil registration is considered as an essential service whereby the recording of civil events is done at sector level (to make it more affordable and near to the service seekers) by a civil registrar. Currently Rwanda records nine civil events, namely birth, marriage, death, acknowledgment of a child born out of wedlock, adoption, guardianship, divorce, legitimization, and annulment of marriage. In

²¹ COVID-19 Survey.

²² United Nations. 2014.

order to record these events, there is a need of a declarant who requests the record of civil events and witnesses for some events like marriage, etc. Due the outbreak of COVID-19 in Rwanda, whereby citizens are required to stay home, recording of civil events was put on hold, except the delivery of civil events certificates that are delivered online through Irembo platform.²³

The notifications of vital events occurring in health facilities is continuously done. However, the registration of these events at the Sector office will be done after the containment period. The registration into the National Population Registry has continued; CROs (civil registration officers) have online access and they can update events using applications received via online portal Irembo.

For the application of vital certificates, such as a birth certificate, the declarant, while applying for the certificate, uploads the documents in their possession (medical certificate [birth or death notification] for births and deaths events at health facilities or cell certificate for those occurring at home) and the Civil Registration Officer can issue these certificates using the online portal Irembo. This process is done entirely online from application to issuance of the certificate and does not require physical contact face to face.²⁴



Costa Rica, 16 April 2020: In Costa Rica, an online notification system has been implemented for births and deaths, which allows most of these types of notifications to be automatically done from hospitals. It even allows, at the same time of filling the notification form, scheduling registration appointments, which minimizes the risk of no-show and of delays of medical notifications.

Notification of marriages is also available online. In regard to judicial services, these are still being delivered through a single-entry point (kiosk) where documents are received; queries are tended via the institutional webpage.²⁵



Georgia, 27 April 2020: Civil registration is considered as an essential service in Georgia. All representatives of the managerial positions are required to report for duty but all other employees, including essential and non-essential services, are requested to fulfill their obligations from home.

COVID-19 did not have much impact on the registration of vital events as far as the majority of registrations (including birth and death) were available online over years. But as for those that were not available electronically, with intensive and immediate efforts of the authority, they also became available online in the shortest period of time. In regards to the functionality of the civil registration authority, namely, the Public Service Development Agency (PSDA), thanks to introducing and promoting e-governance in its services over the years, as well as a result of the immediate measures amidst the Coronavirus, PSDA quickly adapted to the changed circumstances and managed to duly operate even in the emergency situation.

The working arrangements that have been implemented, *inter alia*, are as follows:

- With the aim of ensuring distant work of the overwhelming majority of PSDA employees, the information technology infrastructure was fully adapted in the shortest period of time;
- Those who are requested to report for duty are regularly provided by the Agency with the disinfection and hygienic equipment;

²³ irembo.gov.rw/rolportal/web/rol

²⁴ COVID-19 Survey.

²⁵ Ibid.

- PSDA made almost all services (especially the most demanded ones) available electronically for any customer, with minor exceptions;
- Customers can receive an electronic copy of the requested document (a birth and death certificate) through the website with protection of privacy and confidentiality. The electronic copy has the same legal force as the original (hard copy) document;
- During the emergency situation, all ready (hard copy) documents (including birth and death certificates) are delivered to a customer via post offices with protection of privacy and confidentiality; and
- PSDA also ensures outreach of the population on its services and their availability on a daily basis.²⁶

The fact that computerizing civil registration is critical to meeting international standards of universal and mandatory registration of all vital events occurring in normal circumstances, and even more so in times of disasters, is further supported by examples of countries that did not report adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in discharging registration services. Namely, these countries' computerized civil registration systems, with minor adjustments, were able to function without interruption.



Bahrain, 9 April 2020: In Bahrain, civil registration, including the registration of birth and death, is in the custody of the National Statistics Office and is considered very essential and used heavily for the generation of vital and population statistics. Working from home has been applied to some jobs to minimize the contact among team members. Employees are still reporting to duty in the offices to ensure service continuity.

All civil and vital registration are offered online and all cases can be registered electronically including births, deaths, marital statuses, and issuance of ID cards. Registration of vital events has not been affected so far.

Most cases are serviced through the web portal while service centres are kept open to receive cases that require personal attendance. Employees are asked to apply the recommended safety measures against the risk of infection.

Births and deaths are still reported electronically online by the hospitals. The Ministry of Justice reports to us the marriage and divorce cases. Documents are delivered to the applicants via the post office after clients submit their requests electronically via the web portal.²⁷



New Zealand, 23 April 2020: Civil registration is considered an essential service in New Zealand. Birth and death registration is able to be completed entirely online, with certificates being sent to families using contactless courier. Due to lockdown restrictions, only limited registration staff are working from offices, however staff are able to work to deal with all births and deaths. Some less vital services — such as marriage registration, correction of errors, name or gender changes — were not being delivered during the five-week lockdown but will recommence when this ends.

There has been no significant change in demand for civil registration services as a result of COVID-19. Our birth registration and parenting tool, www.smartstart.services.govt.nz, continues to be used heavily, and there has been no reduction in registration rates. There has been a reduction in calls to our offices,

²⁶ COVID-19 Survey.

²⁷ Ibid.

but this has been balanced by an increase in emails. While our staff need to be in the office to respond to calls, they are able to answer emails from home.

In addition to maintaining core services, the Registrar-General has been part of the leadership for the national COVID Fatality Response. This has included dialing reporting on death rates using online death notification data, regular assessment of mortuary and burial/cremation capacity, and providing additional information through police to families of deceased.

Regular email newsletters are being sent to all marriage celebrants and funeral directors with advice on how to respond to COVID-19.²⁸



Republic of Korea, 10 April 2020: In

Korea, civil registration is an essential service and there are no restrictions on regional containment or movement due to COVID-19, and most of civil registration staff are working in their offices and civil registration is being carried out without any disruption.

The COVID-19 effect on civil registration appears to be minimal, and even if COVID-19 confirmed cases occur in the office, the office will operate again within a few days after the shutdown for preventing the spread of the virus.

Until now, there has been no situation that does not guarantee the continuity of civil registration, but in the case of birth, expansion of the online birth registration system is being promoted.

There are no special recommendations, and CRVS in Korea are reported and processed according to schedule.²⁹

Another considerable source of data for assessing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the functioning of civil registration and the production of the resulting vital statistics was a set of webinars developed by the UN Legal Identity Task Force, the Global CRVS Group, and the UN regional commissions, covering Asia and the Pacific, Africa, and Latin America. These webinars provided an opportunity for civil registration authorities in these regions to exchange experiences and practices in terms of functioning during the pandemic. Approximately 50 countries participated in total and the deliberations and relevant documentation illustrate the difficulties and obstacles encountered on a daily basis in discharging registration services.³⁰

Two major observations emerged from this process. The first was the fact that the registration of vital events, primarily of births and deaths, decreased noticeably in a majority of participating countries, as a consequence of difficulties and obstacles in ensuring regular functioning of the national civil registration system. The population, fearful of being exposed to the virus, was reluctant to approach civil registration offices to register the occurrence of births and deaths. Locking down people in their homes also resulted in major difficulties in terms of reaching a civil registration office. And, even once reached, the office may have been completely closed or working reduced hours.

Simultaneously, the decrease in registration of vital events was also due to the fact that in a number of countries, the links between health institutions and civil registration that were functioning in normal circumstances either weakened or broke altogether. This was a result of partial or full closure of civil registration

²⁸ COVID-19 Survey.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ United Nations Statistics Division. 2020. unstats.un.org/legal-identity-agenda/events/

offices and moving to telecommuting as one of the measures aimed at mitigating exposure to the virus. Although many and varied actions were undertaken, as presented above, the data from countries participating in these webinars document a decrease in the numbers of registered births and deaths. And as also documented in the examples above, a number of countries are expecting a significant backlog and are devising different strategies to tackle it in the wake of the pandemic.

The second observation was the fact that in the countries that were able to maintain steady functioning of the civil registration system, the number of registrations of deaths displays a significant increase compared with the same period in the previous year. These “excess deaths” require considerable investigation as they can be attributed to the COVID-19 disease only in an indirect manner and in a certain percentage that needs to be further established and analyzed. Due to lockdowns and in general avoiding visiting clinics and hospitals for illnesses other than COVID-19, a proportion of “excess deaths” may

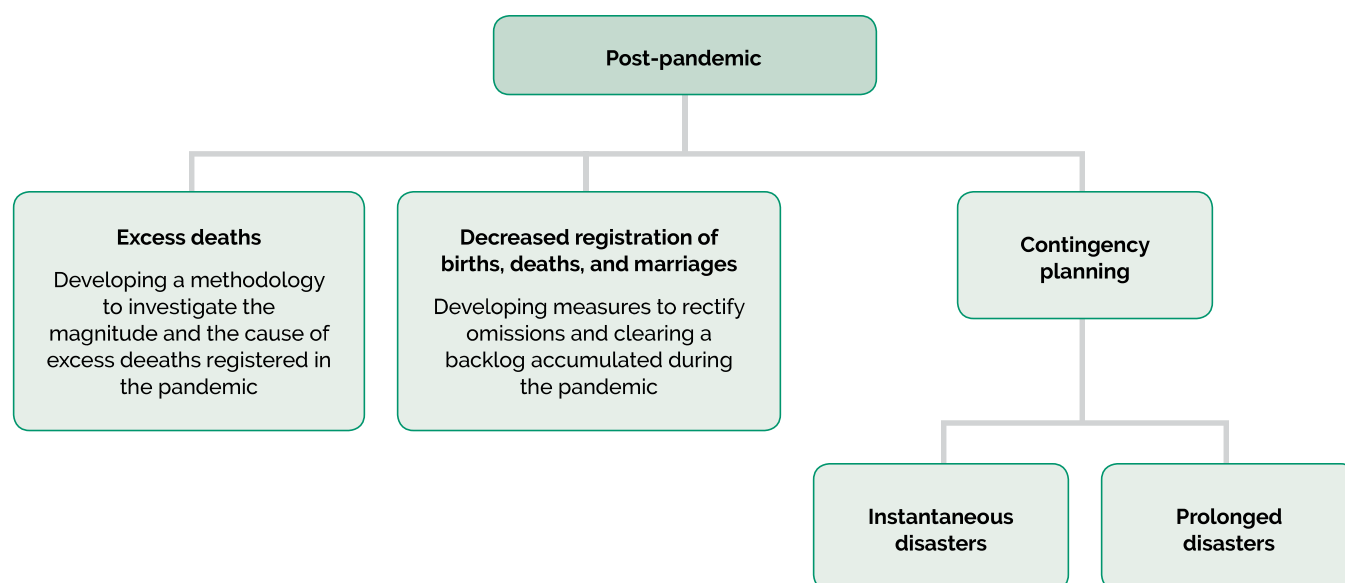
have occurred for lack of treatment of certain diseases in times of pandemic.

Consequently, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and in preparing for future disasters, governments in general, and civil registration systems in particular, need to take action on two major issues:

- Rectify the number of vital events that occurred during the pandemic to more accurately reflect the actual occurrences of births and deaths and investigate “excess deaths,” thus providing a solid source of comprehensive vital statistics that would quantify the costs of the pandemic in terms of lives and years lost.
- Develop detailed strategies and contingency planning to ensure the appropriate functioning of national civil registration systems in disasters yet to come.

These issues and others that need to be addressed are shown in Figure 3 and appear in bold in the text that follows.

Figure 3: The way forward.



In terms of **excess deaths**, in a number of countries, civil registration recorded an increased number of deaths in the first part of 2020 compared with previous years. Hence the need to investigate excess deaths in terms of volume and cause of death in an attempt to provide answers concerning COVID-19 mortality and its impact on the overall structure of mortality by cause of death, due to delayed treatment of various illnesses. Developing and putting firmly in place such harmonized methodology and infrastructure, in terms of interoperability and access to records from health, civil registration, funeral homes, and other relevant institutions, would be required and applicable in case of future disasters and increased numbers of deaths. Therefore, the following actions are required:

- Develop technical mechanisms and procedures and promote harmonization and a common methodological approach in analyzing and interpreting excess deaths;
- Put in place and harmonize data from health institutions, civil registration, funeral homes or similar, and religious institutions; and
- Undertake detailed analysis of mortality statistics time series in terms of assessing the changes caused by the pandemic.

A considerable number of countries reported that the registration of major vital events decreased during the pandemic. Rectifying the **decreased registration of births, deaths, and marriages** might involve the following (the list is not meant to be exhaustive):

- Developing and launching a broad publicity campaign emphasizing the need to register births and deaths that occurred during the pandemic and that were not reported or recorded;

- Adjusting the operations to accommodate the additional reporting and clearing of the backlog (e.g. extend working hours, increase the number of staff);
- Re-establishing the links with the health sector and national statistical office to ensure the production of reliable statistics to quantify the cost of the pandemic in terms of lives and years lost; and
- Eliminating fees for late registration and extending the deadlines for registration of births and deaths.

In the post-pandemic time, countries need to develop detailed and comprehensive **contingency plans** in case of disasters, although not all disasters are similar, hence the distinction. **Instantaneous disasters** are events that cause instant destruction and harm, such as earthquakes, tsunamis, flooding, and similar. Contingency planning for these disasters should consider the following:

- Developing guidelines for establishing procedures for abbreviated registration of deaths, featuring, for example:
 - Expanding the list and eligibility of informants;
 - Establishing processes/waivers for missing documents; and
 - Suspending fees.
- Similarly, for births, ensuring the immediate deployment of registrars in the affected region to ensure delivery of services.
- Establishing auxiliary registrars who will be trained ahead of time in discharging the full responsibilities of civil registrars during the instantaneous disaster; these may be administrative staff in local civil registration offices, or priests or local community leaders, local police chiefs, or attorneys-at-law.

In addition to the measures for instantaneous disasters, the contingency planning for **prolonged disasters**, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and similar epidemics that are expected to extend over a period of time, should take into consideration the following:

- Developing a detailed contingency planning document that would address a multitude of topics;
- Revisiting the legislative framework for civil registration to assess the need to adjust it in terms of contingency planning;
- Instituting and testing various solutions to ensure the functioning of civil registration services in times of prolonged movement restrictions, for example, and all logistical challenges such as the number of personnel, working hours, and protection measures; and
- Ensuring that the government treats civil registration as an essential service that needs to operate in all circumstances, and providing appropriate resources for contingency planning and implementation.

Based on all the findings, documentation, and learning from national practices in terms of civil registration functioning in times of the COVID-19 pandemic, and in order to ensure adherence to international standards for civil registration and vital statistics even in times of pandemic, the following emerges as a priority:

The most critical, crucial, and imperative undertaking in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of enabling universal registration of all vital events occurring in a country is the **digitization and computerization of the civil registration system and apparatus**. This has proved to be the unique factor to ameliorate the impact of this pandemic and to ensure that civil registration is firmly embedded in the legal identity management model that the United Nations calls to be implemented in all Member States by 2030.

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